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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: YOUTH GROUPS COMMITTED TO DEMOCRATIC CHANGE  
DESPITE MYRIAD OF OBSTACLES

REF: A. A) MINSK 0056

[1](#)B. B) MINSK 0179  
[1](#)C. C) MINSK 0106

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: While many youth remain reluctant to wander far from President Lukashenko's camp of supporters, some Belarusian youth groups are actively participating in a number of civic initiatives and/or directly supporting opposition candidates Aleksandr Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin in the lead up to the March 19 presidential elections. These youth groups are involved in such activities as launching pro-democratic change information campaigns, mobilizing voters to participate in street protests in the likely event of falsified elections, and even serving as bodyguards for Milinkevich. Belarusian security forces, perhaps sensing the potential upset of stability in Belarus, are cracking down on youth activists with increasingly more arrests and detentions. Many independent youth leaders recognize that there is still considerable infighting in the opposition camp and that most voters still appear too scared or too content with the regime's economic policies to demand democratic change in the immediate future, but they nonetheless remain cautiously optimistic that the upcoming elections will serve as a rare opportunity to stir up popular demand for reform. End Summary.

#### Youth Groups That Actively Support Opposition Candidates

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[1](#)2. (C) While youth group Zubr is focused more on attempting to unite opposition through the Day of Solidarity and "Jeans" campaigns, youth groups Malady Front (MF) and Right Alliance (RA) stand firmly behind the 10 Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich. (Note: See refs A and B for the latest activities of Zubr.) These two groups have collected signatures and have launched information campaigns on behalf of Milinkevich. According to RA representative Yuri Karetnikov, his organization, whose supporters number around 200, posted Milinkevich's biographical information and portraits on highly-trafficked places during rush hour to increase public recognition of Milinkevich. MF vice-chairman Sergei Lisichonak recently told Poloff that MF, whose numbers range from 1,000-2,000 members, works out of the Milinkevich campaign team headquarters and leads regional campaign offices.

13. (C) RA's Karetnikov remarked to Poloff on February 8 that the youth with whom he has spoken at universities are afraid to support any candidate other than Lukashenko. Karetnikov admitted that he was shocked because this reaction was not what he expected from the youth. (Note: Belarusian Popular Front representative and Milinkevich campaign team member Alex Yanukevich told Poloff on February 7 that the current mentality of students also startled Milinkevich's team. According to Yanukevich, youth under the age of 25 are not actively seeking alternatives to Luakshenko for two reasons: they either do not want problems with the authorities or they openly support Lukashenko and his policies. The latter reason, which could be attributed to the GOB's ideology campaign, was practically unheard of three years ago when supporting Lukashenko was akin to saying one liked the police.)

14. (C) According to Third Way (TW) youth group leader Pavel Morosev, Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" leader Aleksandr Kozulin, appeals to the youth as the best candidate for moderate change without violence because Kozulin is more in the middle - somewhere between the "repressive Lukashenko" and the "liberal Milinkevich." Morosev told Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff on January 30 that Kozulin, the former rector of Belarus State University (BSU), is more pro-Moscow and has the support of the nomenclature in Belarus. The TW representative opined that young people want change, but they are against violence and do not want bloodshed or a revolution. When P/E Chief noted that Kozulin has yet to reach Milinkevich's ratings of name recognition and popular support in the latest independent (and state-controlled) polls, Morosev countered that Kozulin's reportedly low ratings are not accurate. He called into question the quality of polls conducted in a repressive environment like

Belarus and the impartiality of U.S.-financed opinion polls.

15. (C) RA leader Karetnikov admitted that Kozulin may have some popularity in Minsk, given his former position as BSU rector. However, Karetnikov noted that since Kozulin was a government official, many people also see him as a puppet for the Lukashenko regime. Karetnikov went on to assert that the youth who want change without bloodshed are "cowards" and suggested that significant risk and sacrifice always accompany significant change. That said, Karetnikov recognizes that the level of fear in Belarusian society must decrease in order for the opposition to have a chance to defeat Lukashenko now or in the future.

Milinkevich's Minsk Maidan

16. (C) Karetnikov told Poloff that RA is helping Milinkevich's campaign team to orchestrate a Minsk "Maidan" on Victory Square on Election Day. Karetnikov said a maidan is only possible in the capital; the people in the regions are not ready to come out en masse. In order to conduct as safe a demonstration as possible, Karetnikov explained RA is supposed to determine via observation and personal law enforcement contacts where the greatest concentration of the police forces will be on Election Day. Karetnikov also told Poloff that it was RA's responsibility to surround Milinkevich with as many people as possible before escorting him to October Square to ensure his safety.

17. (C) Karetnikov suspects that the GOB will close the metro station next to October Square and will reroute public transportation away from the square to make it more difficult for people to congregate. Karetnikov has proposed to the Milinkevich campaign team that people meet at three nearby locations and walk en masse to October Square. (Note: RA has not received Milinkevich's decision on their proposal.)

18. (C) According to Karetnikov, two conflicting announcements about the Maidan have been released. The first announcement instructs people from the regions to travel

immediately after voting to Minsk so that they can participate in the Maidan. The second announcement, which came from Milinkevich campaign head Sergei Kalyakin, advised people to go to their local polling stations at 8:00 p.m. on Election Day to learn the official results in their respective stations and then to proceed to Minsk. Karetnikov said that Kalyakin's plan would be ineffective, given that most people in the regions would not be able to reach Minsk until the following day and part of the momentum of the Maidan campaign would be lost.

#### Youth Begin to Cooperate, But Friction Remains

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¶9. (C) On February 14, Zubr spokesperson Aleksandr Atroschenkov told Poloff that the leaders of the Day of Solidarity/Jeans campaign, the "Enough" campaign and the "I am for Freedom" campaign have all officially agreed to maintain separate campaigns but to work together to simultaneously promote all three campaigns. (Note: This agreement seems to be the first indication of cooperation between these campaigns.)

¶10. (C) MF's Lisichonak claimed that the "Enough" campaign - i.e., the initiative to create a series of "mini-maidans" throughout Belarus - was originally MF's idea. According to Lisichonak, MF created an "I Love Belarus" campaign to mobilize Belarusian youth in an attempt to try to recreate Kiev's Maidan Square. Then, an unnamed colleague stole the idea, changed the name of the campaign to "Enough" and found separate donors. Lisichonak claimed the campaign has been manipulated to fit the personal interests of individuals in municipal elections, which apparently further upset MF and the Milinkevich team.

¶11. (C) While RA's Karetnikov told Poloff that approximately 10-15% of RA members participate actively in "Enough" by distributing information about the campaign, Karetnikov believes that the Day of Solidarity campaign is floundering. (Note: Karetnikov's comments were made before the February 16

Day of Solidarity event on October Square. See ref B for more details.) Karetnikov said that RA had supported the Day of Solidarity campaign by posting information about the initiative on their website instructing supporters to light a candle on the 16th of every month, but decided not to participate when overall enthusiasm for the campaign waned.

¶12. (C) Karetnikov dismissed Zubr's Jeans Campaign - an initiative to encourage the demonstration of solidarity through wearing denim (ref B) - as an ineffective initiative whose primary audience is the West. Morosev echoed Karetnikov's sentiments and added that, "just like McDonalds, Zubr has a product to sell, which is why Zubr exaggerates the impact of and the level of participation in the Day of Solidarity and the Jeans campaigns." (Note: Morosev stated that he views his organization as a "neutral" youth group that is able to be honest and objective.)

#### Youth - A Cheap Resource for the Milinkevich Team?

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¶13. (C) TW's Morosev opined that the youth occupy a low place in Milinkevich's campaign. Morosev predicted that Milinkevich will use the youth as a "cheap resource" - that is, making them take risks and do dangerous things, like leading riots and protests. (Note: Emboffs have heard similar criticism against the Milinkevich team from prominent women's organizations in Belarus (ref C).)

¶14. (C) MF's Lisichonak told Poloff on January 10 that Milinkevich's campaign team wants MF to organize street campaigns during the election. According to Lisichonak, MF wants to work with people, spread information, and most importantly, mobilize Belarusians for protests in the post election period. Without this preparation, Lisichonak feared that the number of people on the streets would be as small as the number after the 2001 elections - 150-200 people

according to some estimates. However, Lisichonak said that he and MF head Dmitry Dashkevich were upset with Milinkevich's decision to delegate conducting protests to MF because it puts the MF members in greater danger. Lisichonak said they had already heard rumors that several MF members could be arrested before the elections begin.

¶15. (C) Karetnikov told Poloff that RA plans to offer its service as Milinkevich's security detail when he travels around Belarus after he is registered. Four RA members will accompany Milinkevich at all times as his bodyguards. (Note: Right Alliance provided security services at the October Congress of Democratic Forces.)

#### Police Crackdown on Youth Activists

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¶16. (C) Despite the overall lack of activism among the youth, harassment, arrests and detention of this demographic by police has intensified in the lead up to the elections. On February 17, four Zubr members were sentenced to 10-15 days in prison for "petty hooliganism" after police arrested them for standing in the street with a lighted candle in their hands at the Day of Solidarity demonstration on February 16. On February 13, a local court fined MF youth activist Yevgeny Skrabutan USD 135 for illegal electioneering and distribution of materials after police detained him the day before and confiscated 5,000 wallet-size calendars featuring Milinkevich. Zubr spokesman Atroschenkov presented to Poloff a document detailing hundreds of examples of arrests and detentions of Zubr activists in the past five months. Since the start of the Day of Solidarity campaign on September 16, 191 Zubr activists were detained by police for participating youth group related activities and seven were sent to prison.

¶17. (C) Atroschenkov noted that the police are careful not to charge youth activists with political offenses; instead, they use minor charges against the youth like hooliganism, an offense which is punishable by up to two years. Atroschenkov described a recent example where on February 13, Zubr activist Yevgeny Afnagel was charged with hooliganism, detained overnight, and sentenced to 15 days in prison for using foul language in public. Atroschenkov also mentioned a youth activist who was detained and faces up to six years in

prison for removing a Belarusian flag from the Minsk City Executive Committee Building on January 18 and faces.

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Comment  
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¶18. (C) Emboffs repeatedly hear from opposition party leaders and civil society activists all over the country that Belarusian youth, in general, are either too scared or too content with the current regime to support any candidate other than Lukashenko. However, there are some youth who seem committed to using the upcoming elections as a rare opportunity to motivate people to seek democratic change. Currently, youth-backed civic initiatives, such as the Day of Solidarity or Enough, receive more attention abroad than in Belarus, but with the official start of the campaign on February 17, opposition candidates and civil society will have more direct and frequent access to voters - in theory. Krol